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Fathers in Alice Munro's 'Fathers'

Mary Condé

1 'Fathers' is an as yet uncollected short story by Alice Munro published in *The New Yorker*, in August 2002. Set in the nineteen-forties, it uses the background of the second world war both implicitly and explicitly to plot the growth of the narrator.

2 It opens abruptly with an italicised paragraph:

> *On Friday morning last, Harvey Ryan Newcombe, a well-known farmer of Shelby Township, lost his life due to electrocution. The funeral was held Monday afternoon from Reavie Brothers Funeral Home and interment was in Bethel Cemetery. Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest (64).*

3 This paragraph, presumably either from a local newspaper or a parish magazine (given the closing text), gives no indication of date, although we know the death was very recent. This, with the awkwardness of 'lost his life due to electrocution', and the specifying of the funeral home, even though as the funeral is already over it has no practical purpose, suggests the local and the obscure.

4 The absence of any comment on Newcombe except that he was 'a well-known farmer of Shelby Township' indicates both that he had no social existence outside his occupation and that there is absolutely nothing creditable that can be recorded about him; the latter is confirmed by the text from St. Matthew, 11.28, since Christ's words refer to those who follow his teaching, not those who die. Dying, perhaps, is the best thing Newcombe ever did.

5 The opening of the second paragraph, 'Dahlia Newcombe could not possibly have had anything to do with her father's accident' (64), not only identifies Newcombe as the first of the fathers of the story, but is startling in its matter-of-fact allusion to the possibility of patricide, only explained later in the story, as it is explained to the narrator herself, by Dahlia's ambitions to kill her brutal father.

6 The narrative, except for its conclusion, runs backward from the beginning, and a consciousness of time is crucial to it, even to these ambitions. Watching her father come out of a stable carrying a pitchfork (suitable for his devilish nature), Dahlia remarks that if she had a gun she could kill him now: ' "...I should do it while I'm still young enough.

Then I don't get hung" ' (66). The narrator, mulling over this, comes to an opposite conclusion:

> I had a strange idea that she was too young to do it – as if killing somebody were like driving a car or voting or getting married (67).

7 On the other hand, she tersely attributes the improvement of her relationship with her own father, among other things, to the fact that 'I grew older' (71).

8 The ending of the story is a reflection on the 'horrid invasions' of fathers and of the ultimate effect on her:

> And, as the saying goes, about this matter of what molds or warps us, if it's not one thing it will be another. At least that was a saying of my elders in those days. Mysterious, uncomforting, unaccusing (71).

9 The term 'invasions', as a military image, recalls the pervasive background of the second world war, first mentioned in the third paragraph of the story. The narrator speculates that the sound of farmers calling to their plough-horses, heard all over the countryside the spring that Newcombe died, but soon to disappear altogether, was a sound caused by the war, since farmers could not find tractors to buy or else could not find the fuel to run them. This sound, about to cease both because of cyclical and linear time, is presented neutrally and without a deciphering nostalgia. It was as enigmatic, we are told, as the conversations of seagulls or the arguments of crows, except that the tone of voice 'probably' told you when the farmers were swearing. The war, then, as a transient entity, is neither shown as having liberated a pleasant bucolic tradition nor as having imparted a specific meaning to the lives of Shelby Township. Nevertheless, it is explicitly part of the narrator's thinking when she contemplates betrayal – the true subject of the story. She reflects that Dahlia would be 'crazy' to tell her about her plans to kill her father if she were really serious about them, since, she reasons,

> I might betray her. I would not intend to, but somebody might get it out of me. Because of the war that was just ending that spring, I often thought about what it would be like to be tortured. How much would I be able to stand? At the dentist's, when he hit a nerve, I had asked myself, If a pain like that went on and on unless I betrayed where my father was hiding with the Resistance, what would I do? (66)

10 The war, with its history of persecutions and ostracisms, is also implicit in the narrator's account of her relationship with Frances Wainwright, some four or five years before she met Dahlia Newcombe. With both of these girls she walks to and from school, but whereas walking with the sturdy, handsome Dahlia, once she has become the best player on the school basketball team, gives the narrator 'a feeling of distinction' (p.65), she had previously disowned the small, thin, asthmatic Frances as soon as they got to school. She guiltily hides from Frances with her friend Wanda Louise when Frances comes looking for them so that they can eat their lunch together, and, shamefully, joins in the jeering at Frances, who is marked as an outsider because she comes from Chicago. In retrospect, the narrator is uncertain about exactly how shameful her behaviour has been, confessing that,

> I would like to think that it was Wanda Louise who pointed her out to our classmates, when we stood in line ready to march into the schoolroom, as the girl we were always trying to avoid. But I could have been the one that did that, and certainly I went along with the joke, and was glad to be on the side of those doing the giggling and excluding (68).

11 While she is 'ready to march' with her comrades, she does not have the courage to defend what might be worth marching for.

12 Frances does, in fact, begin to function as a kind of parody of a civilization worth marching for when the narrator realizes that Frances, coming from the much-mocked Chicago, where she could see movies every afternoon, is a rich source of information about movie stars – the narrator's own passion. They discuss Ziegfeld girls, Frances (appropriately, given her first name) preferring Judy Garland and the narrator Hedy Lamarr. The narrator chooses Hedy Lamarr for her beauty and Frances Judy Garland because she could sing, a choice clearly connected with her parents, who both used to sing in the Light Opera Society, and to whom she is very attached. When the narrator visits their house for a farewell supper just before Christmas, Frances is dressed exactly like her mother, in an outfit which could have come out of a movie magazine, and has her hair done exactly the same way as her mother – a symptom of what the narrator finds a disquieting intimacy in the family.

13 In many ways the farewell supper is a magical one. The Christmas tree, 'smothered in tinsel, gold and silver beads, and beautiful intricate ornaments' (p.69), is a 'fairy-tale tree' (p.70), and the narrator is served rich, delicious, unfamiliar food, which casts a kind of spell on her:

> ...I seemed to have entered a dream, in which everything I saw was both potent and benign (70).

14 But the fairy-tale element is introduced only to be negated. Years later, although previously in the story, Dahlia's 'fanciful' and 'lovely' name had held out the promise of the beautiful daughter of an ogre in a fairy tale, but she had disappointed expectations by not having 'rippling yellow hair and a sweetly pining expression' (64), in the narrator's view incorrectly, since this meant she was 'not my idea of an ogre's daughter'. Frances Wainwright's potentially magical party is contaminated by another failure to live up to expectations, by what the narrator perceives as the 'charade' of Frances' father acting as waiter. This father behaves incorrectly on all sorts of levels. First of all, he should have stayed in the kitchen and left the girls to enjoy the delicious food in peace. Secondly, he does not sound or smell as a father should: his eager breathing sounds like a dog's and his smell of talcum and lotion makes the narrator think of a baby's fresh diapers. Thirdly, to her alarm, he pretends that the lemonade he is serving is champagne: 'We never had such drinks in our house, and neither did anybody I knew' (69). Fourthly, he pretends to think that they are beautiful young ladies. All these elements offend the narrator's sense of decorum, and emphasize the Wainwrights' status as outsiders.

15 But far worse than all this is the behaviour of Frances' mother and father after a near-disaster with the fire: they kiss each other openly, and fondle each other's behinds. The 'creepy menace' of this is compounded by their assumption that the narrator has really been a friend to Frances, as she knew she had been asked to be. The consciousness of her own treachery, and her recognition that she is at their house under false pretences, spoils the occasion in any case, but she feels that they are to blame, 'corralling me into playing the role of little friend', and humiliating her, 'almost as if somebody had taken a peep into my pants' (70).

16 This is why the chronology of the story is disrupted, so that Frances' father and the narrator's father can be adjacent in her telling, with the reiterated story of Dahlia's father forming a kind of bridge. Although every aspect of the narrator's father's behaviour is completely different from that of Frances' father, the common denominator is humiliation:

> Shame. The shame of being beaten, and the shame of cringing from the beating. Perpetual shame. Exposure. And something connects this, as I feel it now, with the shame, the queasiness that crept up on me when I heard the padding of Mr. Wainwright's slippered feet and his breathing. There were demands that fathers made that seemed indecent, there were horrid invasions, both sneaky and straightforward (71).

17 The reiterated story of Dahlia's father forms a kind of bridge in that it is discussed by the narrator's family, to her retrospective perplexity, as if no kind of animus had ever existed between herself and her father, as if he had never beaten her, as Dahlia had complained that her father did. The narrator's family is secure in their perception of themselves as 'decent people' (71), in no way to be compared with the brutality and vulgarity of the Newcombes, just as they take a superior attitude to the Wainwrights' inappropriate ambition to set up a local wallpapering business. (Both families' names are of course very apt.)

18 The narrator, who retails to her family the melodramatic story of Dahlia's spying on her father (an activity in which she herself had joined), and Dahlia's threats to murder her father, does not ever describe to them the farewell party at the Wainwrights', and the significance of this is that she subsequently learned how to cope with her family precisely by being a narrator.[1] It becomes the way in which she, so to speak, earns her keep, at the same time safeguarding herself by her particular narrative manner:

> I had mastered a deadpan, almost demure style that could make people laugh even when they thought they shouldn't and which made it hard to tell whether I was innocent or malicious (71).

19 She cannot transmit the story of the Wainwrights because she has not yet achieved this mastery, and because it makes her feel 'off balance'. The story of Dahlia and her father, although disturbing, as a story of espionage and projected murder, is not only eminently suitable for wartime, but perfectly fits the stereotypes they have become in the popular imagination. As the narrator puts it,

> The undeviating style of Bunt Newcombe's behavior had made him – and his wife – into such caricatures that a story ought to confirm, to everybody's satisfaction, just how thoroughly and faithfully they played their roles (71).

20 The story of a real-life ogre has its own rigid protocol, just as a fairy tale has. There now (as Munro's story nears its end) appears to be a particularly appropriate sense of closure in the opening paragraph which begins Munro's story and ends Bunt Newcombe's. He has been electrocuted, like a criminal brought to justice, and the text *Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest* can now be seen to refer not to Bunt, but to his family, who can now relax and rejoice in his permanent absence. But, although we may in retrospect read the opening paragraph slightly differently, we do not at any point have to revise our idea of Bunt Newcombe, any more than the narrator's local community has to. (Our, and their, idea of him is made the more inflexible in that we, and they, are never given any insight into the causes of his characteristic domineering irascibility.) Our attention is specifically drawn to the fact that he and his mistreated wife might 'nowadays' be regarded differently:

> Nowadays, Mrs. Newcombe might be seen as a serious case, terminally depressed, and her husband, with his brutish ways, might be looked on with concern and compassion as someone who needed help. In those days, they were just taken as they were and allowed to live out their lives without a thought of intervention – regarded, in fact, as a source of interest and entertainment (64).

21 But, as readers who do not intervene and who are being interested and entertained, we are in the nineteen-forties and not 'nowadays'. Bunt, then, although disturbing in his power and his cruelty, is the least unsettling of the three fathers, and the most straightforward in terms of the explanation of the second world war. The older generation oppresses because it can, and will continue to do so until brought to some kind of justice. No precise date can be assigned to this justice, and it may be perceived as arbitrary and accidental.

22 The two other fathers are unsettling because they both provoke a feeling of guilt and complicity in the younger generation, as represented by the narrator. She remarks quite casually of Frances' movie magazines that

> if she had taken it into her head to remove them I would have been more grief-stricken than when my father drowned the kittens I had found in the barn (69).

23 Of course, this reference to her father's (probably pragmatic) unkindness is far from casual, as establishing a benchmark for the usual behaviour of fathers as far as she is concerned, in the context of a world of glamorous, powerful heroines to which he stands utterly opposed; almost immediately after the reference to the kittens we are told of a lamp with a lampshade like a lady's skirt, which Frances explains represents Scarlett O'Hara, a present from her father and herself to her mother. The juxtaposition of something given with something taken away balances the juxtaposition of Frances' father, who is ignorant of the narrator's true nature, with her own father, who understands it all too well. As she says of his beatings of her,

> ...I saw what he hated in me. A shaky arrogance in my nature, something brazen yet cowardly, was what awoke in him this fury (71).

24 The guilt and shame which this ignorance and this understanding *both* arouse in the narrator suggest a darkness of the human heart already demonstrated and a darkness yet to be exposed, which not only account for the second world war, but identify war as a constantly recurring phenomenon.

25 The three daughters represent three attitudes to fathers: Frances seems uncomplicatedly to love and admire her father, the narrator is ambivalent about hers, and Dahlia explicitly wants to murder Bunt Newcombe. Indeed, it is the very explicitness of Dahlia's desire that makes the narrator doubt it – significantly, since she immediately goes on to speculate about whether she might betray her own father under torture, which is obviously, and yet not explicitly, a wish-fulfilment fantasy.

26 As a meditation set against the background of war, 'Fathers' might at first sight seem oddly to choose daughters rather than sons to set against the fathers who have set the war in progress – even though none is shown as actually fighting in it.[2] But Munro is here particularly interested in the sexual implications of father-daughter relationships. The narrator wonders of Raymond, Dahlia's younger brother, who seems not to be at risk from his father: 'Perhaps a son was abhorred less than daughters?' (66) There is clearly a sexual tension between the narrator and her father, and, as already mentioned, Frances' father's 'slopping-over of attention' makes her feel 'almost as if somebody had taken a peep into my pants'. (This aspect of Munro's story is illustrated in *The New Yorker* by an accompanying photograph of two little girls laughing together, in which one of the little girls is quite unconsciously displaying her knickers.)

27 The incestuous elements in the story represent the ultimate intrusion of an older generation, the 'Fathers', on the younger. The intrusion on and betrayal of a younger

generation on a global scale is also demonstrated by the backdrop of the war, 'just ending that spring', to the local and obscure action of the narrative. We always feel the presence of this larger story looming behind the smaller one.

28 We are also constantly made aware of the significance of audience, from the opening news paragraph about the first father, which suggests a certain complicity with its readership, to the shameless behaviour of the second father in front of his daughter and her guest, to the management of the third father through storytelling. The narrator recognizes that Dahlia needed an audience for her feelings about her father – 'she had just wanted someone to see her hating' (67) – and she, in telling the story 'Fathers', feels compelled to consider her father himself as her audience, and concede that 'If he were alive now, I am sure my father would say that I exaggerate' (71). She sees that she cannot with a clear conscience blame him (and fathers in general) as much as she would like to do, so that this somewhat enigmatic story is itself described in its closing sentence: 'Mysterious, uncomforting, unaccusing.'

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NOTES

1. The importance of storytelling within the stories is a commonplace of Munro criticism: see e.g. Karen E. Smythe, *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queens UP, 1992) p.129; Ajay Heble, *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: U of Toronto P, 1994), p.6; Coral Ann Howells, *Alice Munro* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1998), p.4.

2. Munro is also more usually thought to be fascinated by mothers. See e.g. Magdalene Redekop, *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

ABSTRACTS

Publié au New Yorker en août 2002, "Fathers" se déroule dans le contexte de l'après guerre alors qu'aucun de ses personnages n'a pris part active à la guerre. La nouvelle présente une réflexion sur nombre de variantes de tyrannie patriarcale qu'elle refuse cependant d'incriminer. Les termes qui lui servent de clôture : "mysterious, uncomforting, unaccusing" résument l'histoire dans ce qu'elle présente de plus énigmatique : son refus de prendre parti.

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